

Is There A Relationship Between SCCs and Milk Prices?

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Each year in January I assist the North Carolina Dairy Producers Association with selecting the recipients of their quality milk producer awards program. The top quality milk producer for the previous calendar year in each of three herd size categories is selected from the nominees that are submitted by the Regional Environmental Health Specialists (health department dairy farm inspectors).

One of the Specialists told me that it was more difficult to select the nominees from his area of the state for this past year than it had been in previous years. When I asked him why, he responded that the milk quality parameters (SCC and SPC values) for the producers he reviewed were somewhat higher and closer in value between farms for 2002 than in the previous year. The quality of milk that was produced was still very good, but perhaps not quite as good as the previous year. He speculated this was the case because of the low farm milk prices. He suspected that dairy farmers were trying to produce and ship as much milk as they could to maximize milk sales receipts. In doing that, the farmers continued to milk cows that they normally would have sold or dried off early. By milking those cows the dairy producers were perhaps continuing to milk some cows with slightly lower quality milk (higher SCC and SPC values), which contributed to the lower milk quality values for the dairies in the Specialist's area.

The Specialist's comments prompted me to compare the North Carolina DHI monthly SCC scores for 2001 and 2002. In so doing I found that the values were higher for almost every month in 2002. The state-wide DHA data supported the Specialist's findings for all the producers in his area of the state. Why the values were higher in 2002 is an unanswered question. Were they higher in-part because of the low milk prices and the scenario suggested by the Specialist, or perhaps the weather in 2002 caused the higher SCC values, or perhaps dairy producers scaled back on their mastitis prevention and treatment programs to reduce costs during a very tight economy, or perhaps a combination of these or other reasons caused the higher SCC values in 2002.

Whatever the reasons or causes were in 2002 for the slightly higher SCC values noted by the inspection specialist and seen in the DHI data, I urge dairy producers to continue following the management practices that ensure the production of high quality milk and which minimize the incidence of mastitis infections in their herds. In order to increase the amount of milk sold, producers should: 1) be sure the rations fed their cows are adequate; 2) provide clean, dry facilities for their cattle; 3) follow proper milking practices; and 4) implement or maintain the other management practices that promote for healthy and productive animals. Extension agents and specialists, veterinarians, and other knowledgeable dairy consultants can assist producers with a review of their management practices. In rough economic times, seeking the assistance of experts should be a practice that dairy producers automatically implement.